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ABSTRACT

Hess and Camara (1979) have shown that it is post-divorce family functioning, rather than family structure, that is most important in influencing the effects of divorce on children. A child's adjustment to divorce should be viewed as a developmental process rather than as a single event. Consequently, it is important to focus on the ways in which the psychological structure and family process variables in the single-parent family help to mediate the effects of divorce on the child. To explore this issue, research which specifically investigated the post-divorce custodial parent-child relationship was reviewed. Literature covering the past 25 years revealed that variables which have been shown to influence the effects of divorce on children include: (1) parent and child demographics; (2) personal characteristics of the parent, including stress level, distress, emotional availability, values, and competence/assertiveness; (3) the relationship between the parent and the child; and (4) the use of support networks. Important aspects of the parent-child relationship include the parent's satisfaction with the relationship, the child's satisfaction, the amount of parent-child contact, parental discipline, parental explanation of the divorce, and parental expectations of the child. This information could be useful for single parents in helping their children adjust to divorce. (NB)

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# THE CUSTODIAL PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP AS A MEDIATING FACTOR IN THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

BY

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# THE CUSTODIAL PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP AS A MEDIATING FACTOR IN THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

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A Doctoral Research Paper

Presented to

the Faculty of the Rosemead School of Psychology

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

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by

Janis Carol Rasmussen

May 1987

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ABSTRACT

THE CUSTODIAL PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP AS A MEDIATING FACTOR IN THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

Janis Carol Rasmussen

Studies investigating the differential effects of custodial parent factors and parent-child relationship factors on children's divorce adjustment are reviewed. Emphasis is placed on post-divorce family functioning as it has been hypothesized to be more important than family structure in mediating the effects of divorce on children. Published literature was selected to cover the 25 year period from 1962 to the present. Variables such as parent and child demographics, personal characteristics of the parent, the relationship between the parent and the child, and the use of support networks have all been shown to influence the effects of divorce on children.

# The Custodial Parent-Child Relationship as a Mediating Factor in the Effects of Divorce on Children

The childhood experience of parental divorce is an increasingly common event. Between 1960 and 1978, the annual divorce rate rose from 9 per 1,000 married women to the estimated all-time high level of 22 per 1,000 married women (Glick, 1979). Based on his comprehensive review of the U. S. Bureau of the Census statistics, Glick (1979) projects that one-third of the children 18 years of age in 1990 will have lived with a divorced parent. Similarly, Bumpass and Rindfuss (1979) indicated that one out of every three white children in the United States will experience the marital disruption of their parents before age 16. They also indicated that the incidence of marital disruption for black children is even greater: Three out of every five will experience marital disruption before age 16. Members of the mental health and legal professions, concerned parents, and affected children are all interested in understanding the effects that the experience of parental divorce has upon children.

Findings in this area are far from simple and conclusive. The research reflects the complex nature of the relationship between parental divorce and children. Fortunately, research in this area has changed over time to acknowledge more complexity in the relationship.

## Historical Overview

Changes in the divorce research over the past few decades reflect an increased awareness of the complexity of the subject. For example, studies done in the 1950s and 1960s often failed to distinguish between "broken homes" that were the result of divorce and those that were the result of parental death (Tuckman & Regan, 1966). More recent studies have demonstrated differences between the two (Felner, Ginter, Boike, & Cowen, 1981; Reilly, Hasizi, & Bond, 1983; Rozendal, 1983) and have made further distinctions between single-parent and reconstituted families (Nunn, Parish, & Worthing, 1983) and between mother-headed and father-headed families (Fry & Grover, 1983).

Another change in the research can be seen in that many early studies focused on demonstrating direct, causal relationships between a child's membership in a single-parent family and the child exhibiting various types of maladjustment (e.g., delinquency, school failure, inappropriate sex role development). These studies made the assumption that the single-parent family is a deviant form of the normal family--not a family form to be studied on its own terms (Levitin, 1979). As Allen (1978) has pointed out in relation to black families, when one family type is adopted as the cultural ideal (such as the white, middle class family), qualities which differentiate other family

types from this "norm" are taken as indices of dysfunction. In terms of the single-parent family, the adoption of this viewpoint only serves to support the myth that the single-parent family is necessarily pathological in character. Current studies tend to be less rigid and less likely to hold such a narrow view of single-parent families.

A third problem evidenced in some of the early literature was the tendency to view all single-parent families as a homogeneous group (Levitin, 1979). They were conceptualized in such a way that their single-parent status was the most important factor, while other variables (e.g., family relationships, parental adjustment, socio-economic status) were neglected or barely mentioned. Although there are recent studies that still make this assumption, the current trend is to recognize the vast number of possible intervening variables and at least to make mention of them even if all are not controlled in the study.

A fourth related trend is that researchers are moving away from considering divorce as a single life event, or stressor, to investigating it as a developmental process. Beginning with the initial separation, a chain of events takes place requiring adjustment for both parents and children. The assimilation of these divorce-related changes in the psychological structure of families is a dynamic process which varies over time and cannot be easily investigated (Kurdek, 1981). Thus, many researchers are

realizing that more controlled, longitudinal, multiple-variable studies are needed. Although this goal has by no means been comprehensively realized in the current literature, several researchers are attempting to widen the scope of their studies to accomodate this perspective (Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, & Zill, 1983; Hess & Camara, 1979; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Kulka & Weingarten, 1979).

Therefore it is clear that the study of the effects of divorce on children needs to take into consideration the diversity among divorcing families rather than considering them all to be the same. Characteristics of divorced families that influence the effects on children need to be identified and investigated. Awareness of such characteristics would help divorced parents know how to minimize any negative effects of divorce on their children. After all, divorce does not consist of a single decision alone, but it is a process involving a series of changes not only for each individual involved, but in the psychological structure of the family and in family process.

## Purpose

It is in light of these suggestions that this paper will review a selected portion of the literature on the effects of divorce on children. Most importantly, Hess and Camara (1979) have shown that it is post-divorce family functioning, rather than family structure, that is most

important in influencing the effects of divorce on children. As can be seen from the historical overview of the literature above, it is important to investigate the single-parent family as a family form in its own right. Also, as it is more accurate to view a child's adjustment to divorce as a developmental process rather than a single event, it is important to focus on the ways in which the psychological structure and family process variables in the single-parent family help to mediate the effects of divorce on the child.

In an attempt to isolate and study a limited set of variables in order that they may be more fully explored, this paper will synthesize and review only the literature that specifically investigates the post-divorce custodial parent-child relationship. Much of the literature in this area has been speculative in that it suggests what parents can do to help their children adjust to the divorce purely on the basis of the discovery of some negative outcome in children. However, relatively little research has been done to specifically investigate how custodial parent factors actually influence their children. Thus, this paper will review and synthesize only the literature that investigates the differential effects of custodial parent factors and parent-child relationship factors on their children.

As this review will be limited to a specific set of variables, several related areas of concern will not be considered. First, the relationship of the child to the

non-custodial parent will not be addressed, although it is highly relevant to the child's ability to adapt to divorce, as this relationship is not within the newly formed single-parent family. Similarly, the literature dealing with the parent-parent relationship post-divorce and its influence on the child will not be addressed, as it is also not within the context of the single-parent family. However, this is not meant to imply that either of these relationships are unimportant influences in the child's life, but only that the investigation of the effects of these relationships is beyond the scope of this paper. In addition, the custodial parent's relationships with members of the opposite sex and their effect on the child will not be considered, as this extends beyond the limits of the family psychological structure and family process variables in the new family.

Literature for this review was chosen to cover the 25 year period from 1962 to the present. Appropriate research was identified through a computerized search and through the reference lists of the articles consulted.

This paper will serve several functions. Most importantly, it will outline for single parents specific factors that may or may not be modifiable in their relationships with their children and how these factors may mediate the possible negative effects of divorce on their children. It is hoped that an explanation of these factors will help parents understand more about how their children

and the parent-child relationship may be affected by the divorce. Also, there is a need for further research that specifically addresses family process variables in the post-divorce family. It is hoped that this review will help to stimulate and direct future research in this area.

## Methodological and Conceptual Issues

While the methodological and conceptual quality of the research concerning children and divorce has improved over the past few decades, all of the problems discussed above still exist in some of the literature. In addition, there are several methodological and conceptual difficulties that arise more commonly in the custodial parent-child literature.

By far, the most common methodological and conceptual problem in the investigation of the relationship between the custodial parent and the child concerns the use of correlational designs. Typically, in investigating the custodial parent-child relationship, outcomes from parent measures (e.g., stress level, social adjustment, satisfaction with the relationship) are correlated with outcomes from child measures (e.g., distress, social involvement, satisfaction with the relationship). While correlational studies can indicate that some type of relationship exists between these variables, they cannot determine a causal relationship. Thus, child behaviors that

are interpreted as consequences may actually be the causes. For example, as Kanoy and Cunningham (1984) point out, a child's pathology may not be the result of parental divorce but may rather be one of the primary contributing causes. In addition, correlational designs often tend to oversimplify the phenomena under investigation by failing to control for or rule out covariates of the variables.

Another common problem throughout the divorce literature is sample selection and description. In the study of the custodial parent-child relationship, often the samples are drawn from convenient populations, such as clients from a clinical practice or participants in a volunteer organization such as Parents without Partners. This makes generalization from these samples to a larger population of divorced families difficult (Kanoy & Cunningham, 1984).

The measurement strategies employed by researchers may also pose a problem if they are somehow influenced by the author's conceptualization of divorce. As Kanoy and Cunningham (1984) point out, if the researcher views divorce as a "disaster," his measurement strategies are more likely to be biased toward this conclusion than those of a researcher who conceptualizes divorce as a neutral event with opportunities for both positive and negative responses.

Another serious measurement problem concerns the use of self-report questionnaires in studying the custodial parent

and child relationship. Quite often, subjective measures are obtained when more objective measurements may have been possible and more appropriate. When this happens, it introduces another possibility for biased results.

Similarly, when self-report is the only way to measure a variable, parent and teacher evaluations of a child's reactions or adjustments to divorce are often used without actually consulting the child about his or her experience. While parents and teachers are valuable sources of information, it must not be overlooked that the child is generally the one who can give the most accurate account of his or her own responses. Teachers and parents may be biased in some way. For example, a parent may not see the child's adjustment difficulties due to his or her own stress level, or the parent may project his or her own difficulties onto the child. Of course, this criticism would not apply to children who are so young that they are unable to communicate their experiences to researchers. In these cases, it would seem that the parent is one of the best sources of information available, in addition to more objective methods.

## Parent and Child Demographics

In reviewing the custodial parent-child relationship and its mediating influence on the effects of divorce on children, some of the most basic factors to consider are

demographic variables such as the age and gender of the parent and the child. It is important for parents to remember that although these aspects of the parent-child relationship cannot be changed, it is helpful to understand their influences on the child.

Custodial Parent Demographics

Age. Few studies have investigated the relationship of custodial parent age and child adjustment to divorce. However, these few studies do yield similar results in favor of older parents, whose children tend to have more positive characteristics. Pett (1982), with data from 206 parent interviews, found a positive correlation between parent age and social adjustment in the child. Woody, Colley, Schlegelmilch, Maginn, and Balsanek (1984) reached similar conclusions. Their results, based on data from 87 parent-child interviews, concluded that younger custodial parents had children with significantly more maladaptive symptoms than they had prior to the divorce (e.g., fearfulness, school problems, hyperactivity), while older custodial parents' children did not show such an increase.

Gender. The literature that deals with custodial parent gender most typically examines the effects of the absence of the father in the family (mother custody). There are few studies that deal with mother absence (father custody). There are also very few studies that look at the

differential effects of father absence vs. mother absence on the children.

Much of the father-absence literature has focused on the effects of the father's absence on male development, with a large part of the literature pointing to inadequate sex role development as the primary effect (Marino & McCowan, 1976). Biller (1970) noted that the absence of the father is most disruptive for the boy during the first five years of life. If the father leaves the family during this time, interference with the boy's masculine identification is more likely to occur. However, Biller and Bahm (1971) found that there is something the custodial mother can do to help. They discovered that the more the early father absent boy perceives his mother as encouraging aggressive behavior, the more likely he is to have a masculine self-concept. Also, the presence of older, surrogate sex-role models for males (e.g., older brothers or father substitutes) have been found to help in the male identification process (Marino & McCowan, 1976). As Cashion (1982) points out in her review, some of the current literature suggests that fathers do not have to be present for boys to behave in a masculine way. To support this, she cited research that has yielded no significant differences in aggressive behavior or semantic style for boys from father-absent and father-present homes. However, she did caution that much more research needs to be done in this area.

It generally appears from the literature that, for both boys and girls, the earlier the separation from the father, the more detrimental the effects. However, while the negative effects for boys are likely to be seen early in their lives, the negative effects for girls are more likely to appear later, most noticeably after puberty. The research suggests that father-absent girls closely identify with the female role as the result of the lack of a father figure. This lack also results in difficulty in formation of male/female relationships after puberty. Generally, father-absent females are more likely to develop negative attitudes toward males and experience more disruptions in interactions with males than females from intact homes (e.g., they tend to be more forward and aggressive with males, seeking more attention and greater physical contact) (Hetherington, 1972; Marino & McCowan, 1976).

In contrast to the father-absence literature, very little has been done to investigate the effects of mother absence. As Marino and McCowan (1976) state, this may be attributable to the prevalence of father absence over mother absence in the United States. While the literature concerning maternal deprivation is tangentially related, more research needs to be done that specifically investigates the effects of mother absence.

Fortunately, there are a few studies that have compared mother custody and father custody children on a number of

different adjustment variables. Santrock and Warshak (1979) found that children living with the opposite sex parent (father-custody girls and mother-custody boys) are less well adjusted than are children living with the same-sex parent. For example, they found that boys living with their father were less demanding, more mature, more sociable, and more independent than girls living with their fathers. Conversely, girls living with their mothers were better adjusted in all of the above ways than boys living with their mothers. These results are consistent with Hetherington, Cox, and Cox's (1978) description of the difficult relationship that may develop between custodial mothers and their sons. Hetherington et al. found that the custodial mothers and their sons seemed to experience more negative and long-lasting adverse relations (related to the boy's greater oppositional and aggressive behavior) than did mothers and daughters.

In contrast, Kurdek, Blisk, and Siesky (1981) did not find that children with opposite sex custodial parents were less well adjusted. However, as they point out, their sample did not contain an adequate number of custodial fathers. It is possible that their sample size was too small to readily achieve significance. Finally, Fry and Grover (1983) have found that there were more "problem children" (based on children's self-evaluation of their own problems) in father-headed homes and that children in

mother-headed homes had fewer perceptions of both emotional neglect and personal anxiety.

It is difficult to conclude, from these varied results, whether the mother or father custody single-parent family is to be preferred in a given situation. However, it does appear that the gender of the children and their current age are two important variables to consider. Generally, it appears that the same-sex parent is the most preferable for both boys and girls, especially if a surrogate cross-sex role model is available for the child. However, one study has suggested that father-headed homes are more likely to have problem children. While a causal relationship cannot be determined, this finding should also be kept in mind. In addition, there are many more variables to be considered in such a decision, and it is clear that more research needs to be done in this area.

Number of prior marriages. It appears that few studies have directly considered the custodial parent's number of prior marriages as an influence on the child. However, Pett's (1982) research concluded that as the number of prior marriages increased, the social adjustment of the child decreased.

Child Demographics

Age. While it has long been hypothesized in the clinical literature that children of varying age levels are affected differently by divorce, relatively little empirical

evidence has been presented to date. However, recent research has begun to support the clinical observations and theories that children of different age groups respond differently to divorce within the parent-child relationship. As previously mentioned, Biller (1970) noted that father absence is most disruptive for the boy during the first five years of life. Interestingly, Copeland (1984) found that 6- to 8-year-olds have less positive relationships with their mothers immediately following separation than they have approximately six months later. Conversely, she also found that 9- to 12-year-olds have more positive interactions immediately following separation than they have six months later.

In an attempt to understand these results, Copeland hypothesized that the mother (custodial parent in this case) reacts more positively with older children than with younger children immediately after the separation, while the reverse becomes true six months later. Another possible explanation is that children process divorce differently at certain cognitive stages. From a Piagetian perspective, the younger children in this study are developmentally more concrete in their thinking, focusing on what exists concretely in the present. Thus, they are less likely to be negatively impacted by the abstract possibilities of the intact, happy family that might have been possible, however remotely so. Once they recover from the initial shock of the separation,

they may adjust better as they live more concretely in the present. In contrast, the older children are better able to comprehend the abstract or the hypothetical "dream family," find their own situation wanting by comparison, and thus perpetuate their maladjustment.

One other study supports the notion that older children may experience more difficulties in adjusting to the divorce. Jacobson (1978a) found that while 7- to 13-year-olds tended to evidence greater antisocial behavior and academic disability as they lost time spent in joint activities with their custodial mother after the divorce, 3- to 6-year-olds did not evidence any significant negative effects associated with activity lost with their mothers post-divorce.

Gender. As much of the literature regarding sex differences in children's adjustment to divorce is interrelated with the sex of the custodial parent, the reader is referred to the section of this paper that discusses the gender of the custodial parent.

Much of the research on child age indicates that boys tend to have a more difficult time adjusting to the divorce than girls. Boys have been found to be less happy, more distractable, and generally more maladjusted than girls (Hodges, Buchsbaum, & Tierney, 1983). These results are consistent with the findings of Hetherington et al. (1978), who found that children in divorced families were more

dependent, disobedient, aggressive, whining, demanding, and unaffectionate than those in intact families, with these effects appearing most markedly in mother-son interactions. Similarly, Copeland (1984) found that while both boys and girls varied in their relationships with their custodial mother after divorce (vascillating between positive and negative interactions depending on time since divorce and age of the child), the effects for boys were particularly striking.

While it appears from these studies that boys actually do have a more difficult time adjusting to the divorce than girls, it is very important to consider that all of the above studies deal with father-absent boys. While it may be that boys generally fare worse in the divorce process, it is also possible that the above results are a function of the gender of the custodial parent, not the child's gender, as discussed previously. Nevertheless, given the prevalence of mother-headed versus father-headed single-parent families, it seems appropriate to generalize that if indeed mother custody is related to more problems for boys, there will be more boys than girls with divorce-related adjustment difficulties. Also, it must be mentioned that one other study found no relationship between the child's sex and maladjustment in children (Pett, 1982).

In summary, it appears that some general conclusions can be drawn in relation to custodial parent and child

demographics. First, concerning parents, the research indicates that custodial parents who are older and have a history of fewer prior marriages tend to have children who are better adjusted than younger parents or parents with more prior marriages. However, as these conclusions are based on relatively few studies, more research is needed. In general, the research seems to indicate that children living with the opposite-sexed parent have more adjustment problems. However, most of the literature concerning parent gender has focused on father absence and its negative effects on boys. While a few negative effects of father absence have been found for girls as well, the literature clearly emphasizes the adjustment difficulties for boys. It is important to consider that relatively little is known about the effects of mother absence on both boys and girls. Thus, it is difficult to say whether girls would have as many adjustment problems in mother-absent families as boys do in father-absent families. Clearly, further research would help to clarify these issues.

Second, concerning child demographics, earlier research suggested that the earlier the divorce occurred in a child's life, the more disruptive it would be. However, more recent research suggests that divorce affects children in different ways depending on their age. As there are still relatively few studies in this area, however, it is difficult to say exactly how a child's age influences the effects of divorce

on his or her adjustment. One study indicated that younger children have a more difficult time immediately after the separation while older children fare better initially, but that these age differences in adjustment reverse over time (i.e., younger children adjust better than older children later on). Another study indicated that younger children are not negatively affected by activity lost with their mothers, while older children are negatively affected. Thus, while studies such as these are beginning to show that the child's age is an important factor to consider, much more research needs to be done to investigate this more thoroughly.

## Personal Characteristics of the Parent

Some of the most crucial variables in considering the custodial parent-child relationship are the personal characteristics of the parent. As is evident in any type of relationship, the characteristics that one of the members brings to the relationship are bound to be influential on the other member. Given the nature of the parent-child relationship, with the child particularly dependent on the parent, we would expect the intensity of the parent's influence on the child to be particularly important.

Stress Level

Research on parental stress seems to yield consistent findings: Greater parent stress is correlated with negative outcomes in the child. Woody et al. (1984) found that greater parent stress was associated with more maladaptive symptoms in the child. Similarly, in their study on infants (ages 12 to 18 months), Vaughn, Egeland, Sroufe, and Waters (1979) discovered that less stable, or more stressful caretaking environments were associated with more anxious custodial mother-child attachments and with fewer secure attachments, compared to more optimal environments. In addition, an increase in stress in the mother over a six month period was associated with changes from a secure to an anxious attachment.

Distress

Along similar lines, the research seems to support a commonly suspected relationship between elevated distress in the custodial parent and elevated distress in the child. Nelson (1981) found that the happier the wife was upon separating from her husband, the higher the emotional adjustment of the children under her care. In the study conducted by Woody et al. (1984), the parent's experience of general or psychosomatic symptoms was a predictor of a greater number of child symptoms. Similarly, Fulton (1979) found that the more distressed the custodial mother

described herself, the more distressed she described her children.

In addition, while these results seem to be clearly supportive of the commonly held belief that parent distress negatively affects the children, some caution is advised in weighing them too heavily. The self-report nature of the Woody et al. study and especially the Fulton study, where the parent evaluated the child's distress, introduces the possibility of parent bias or parent projection of his or her own distress onto the child. This would be consistent with Patterson's (1982) finding that depressed mothers rate their own child's behavior more negatively than do outside observers, unlike the case for non-depressed mothers. Also, it is possible that a third variable (such as environmental stress) may influence both of these two variables independently, causing it to look as though one has influenced the other.

Emotional Availability

Research generally has found that a lack of emotional availability of the custodial parent tends to be associated with negative outcomes in the child. Hodges et al. (1983) found that the greater the degree to which custodial mothers described themselves as "reserved" (versus "warm"), the more they described the child as "acting out," "distractable," and in general, maladjusted. Similarly, in another study,

"problem children" described parental treatment as more rejecting and less emotionally positive than did "non-problem children" (Fry & Grover, 1983). However, it may be that both of these studies suffer from subjective bias. In the first study, evaluations of parental warmth and child outcomes were both done by the parents. In the second study, both evaluations (of child and parent) were done by the child. It is reasonable to consider that a child who considers himself to be a problem might evaluate his or her parent as being rejecting. Furthermore, it may be that the parent is rejecting as a result of the child's problems rather than vice versa.

Other studies have indicated a relationship between the custodial parent's ability to focus on the child's needs and the child's adjustment. In a study done in Poland, Wojciechowska (1981) found that mothers of well-adjusted children display more activity addressed to the child than to herself (e.g., creating conditions for the child to engage in social interactions with peer and the father). However, caution must be taken in generalizing these results to our culture as the study was conducted in Poland and cultural differences may exist. Along similar lines, Fry and Trifiletti (1983) in interviewing adolescents, discovered that the custodial parent's preoccupation with him or herself was perceived as interfering with consolidation of the adolescent's identity needs.

Values

Interestingly, parental values have also been found to be associated with certain outcomes in the child. Mothers of "well-adjusted" children have been found to particularly value "love" and "respect," while custodial mothers of "maladjusted" children were more inclined to value "security" (Wojciechowska, 1981). In addition, parents who did not value others' help in coping with the divorce had children with more maladaptive symptoms than parents who highly valued the help of others (Woody et al., 1984).

Competence/Assertiveness

Some studies have pointed to a positive association between increased parental competence and positive child factors. In the study cited above, Wojciechowska (1981) found that mothers of well-adjusted children were not only particularly inclined to value "love" and "respect," but also were inclined to accomplish the goals they set for themselves and their children in their lives. Also, one study concluded that women with higher occupational status were associated with children with fewer antisocial behaviors than were women in low-paying, low-status jobs (Nelson, 1981). However, it is clear that other variables, such as socioeconomic status, may be covarying here. Finally, Pett (1982) found that parents who were higher in social adjustment were associated with children who were higher in social adjustment.

Others' findings are not as clearly understood, however. Adolescents in Fry and Trifiletti's (1983) study reported that their custodial mothers' increased "helplessness" in addition to her increased assertiveness was particularly distressing to them. It appears, that at least for these adolescents, the inconsistency between the two was most problematic.

In a study with surprising results, Kurdek et al. (1981), discovered that the well-adjusted child was associated with a custodial parent low in "personal competence," with personal competence defined as hardworking, sincere, dependable, assertive, achievement-oriented, and self-controlled. Kurdek et al. hypothesized that this finding may be indicative of diminished competence in parenting, possibly as the result of the divorce. They hypothesized that a parent who is hard-working, achievement-oriented, assertive, self-controlled, responsible and dependable (all major loadings on their "competent" personality factor) may not be able to be receptive to the child's needs and views.

In summary, there are some general conclusions that may be made concerning the way in which the personal characteristics of the custodial parent affect the child. The research has consistently suggested that parental stress, distress, and lack of emotional availability are all correlated with maladjustment in the child. However, as all

of the studies cited in these areas may, to some degree, suffer from subjective bias, additional research utilizing more objective measurements is needed. The research has also suggested that custodial parents with adjusted children tend to value love and respect in their relationships most highly, while parents with maladjusted children value security above all.

While the research concerning parental stress, distress, emotional availability, and values tends to yield consistent results, the literature concerning parental competence and assertiveness is more conflictual. While some studies indicated that increased parental social adjustment, occupational status, and competence are associated with increased adjustment in the child, one study was somewhat discrepant, suggesting that parental competence is associated with maladjustment in the child. It may be that each of these studies generally supports the association of parental competence with increased child adjustment, but that differences in the definition of terms has caused some confusion. It is clear that more research is needed that adequately defines and measures these constructs.

## Relationship of the Parent and the Child

In their pioneering study, Hess and Camara (1979) were one of the first to show the importance of the relationship of the parent and the child post-divorce in influencing child adjustment. They found that the child's continuing relationship with his or her parents affects him or her as much or more than the divorce itself. Thus it was Hess and Camara who helped to initiate the notion that it is family process, rather than family structure, that is most important in studying the effects of divorce on children.

Hess and Camara (1979) defined the quality of the parent-child relationship in terms of the degree of positive and negative emotion expressed between the parent and child, openness of communication, and amount of child-oriented time they spend together. In addition to showing the importance of the parent-child relationship as opposed to family structure, they also discovered that the quality of this relationship was more significant for the child's adjustment than the level of discord between parents. Also, the quality of this relationship was found to have a positive influence on the child's social and school adjustment, and a negative influence on the child's stress and aggression.

Thus, Hess and Camara's work helped to set the stage for recognizing the importance of the parent-child relationship as opposed to emphasizing the importance of

family structure. The several aspects of the parent-child relationship that have been isolated and investigated to date will be reviewed. These areas include parent and child satisfaction with the relationship, amount of contact, the type of discipline employed, parental control/permissiveness, parental communication regarding the divorce to the child, and parental expectations of the child.

Parent's Satisfaction with the Relationship

While the research on custodial parent satisfaction appears to indicate a positive correlation between greater satisfaction and greater child adjustment, the results are inconclusive due to possible bias. For example, Pett (1982) concluded that the better the relationship was in quality, the better the child was adjusted socially. While a causal relationship of these two variables may exist, this cannot be determined due to the correlational nature of the study. Further, as parental ratings were used to measure both the quality of the relationship and the child's social adjustment, it is difficult to determine whether some sort of parental bias is operating.

Hodges et al. (1983) improved upon Pett's study by correlating parental ratings of satisfaction with teacher ratings of child adjustment. This study also found that the more the custodial parent (in this case, the mother) was satisfied with the parent-child relationship, the less

acting out, the less distractable, and the less maladjusted the child, as seen by the teacher. While this study helps to rule out parental bias, a causal direction still cannot be determined between the two variables. It is possible that these results merely illustrate that the parent is more likely to be satisfied in a relationship with a well-adjusted child.

Child's Satisfaction with the Relationship

The study of the relationship of the child's satisfaction with the parent-child relationship and child adjustment also suffers from the same problems concerning the determination of a causal direction. While it appears that child satisfaction is generally associated with child adjustment, it is difficult to say whether the satisfied child feels that way because he or she is adjusted or the child is adjusted because he or she is satisfied with the parent-child relationship. Therefore, it is important that these results be interpreted with this caution in mind.

First, from a positive perspective, adolescents who rated their single-parent families as more helpful in supporting them emotionally were found to be less anxious on an objective measure of anxiety (Farber, Felner, & Primavera, 1985). Similarly, children who viewed their custodial parent in a positive light were more communicative and were most likely to choose their parent as a partner for a discussion of personal issues (Smollar & Youniss, 1985).

Second, from a more negative perspective, Farber et al. (1985) found that children who rated their single-parent families as less cohesive and more conflict-filled were more anxious and those who rated their families as more independent and more controlling were more hostile. Similarly, children classified as "problem children" by teacher ratings described parental treatment as more rejecting and less emotionally positive than did children classified as "non-problem" children (Fry & Grover, 1983). Fry and Trifiletti (1983) found that when the custodial parent's preoccupation with self was perceived by the adolescent, the adolescent believed this to interfere with consolidation of his or her own identity needs.

Amount of Parent-Child Contact

The findings on parent-child contact are far from conclusive. Relatively few studies have considered this aspect of the custodial parent-child relationship, and those that have been done have yielded varying results. In a study of preschoolers, Hodges et al. (1983) found that quantity of contact with parents was unrelated to adjustment in children of divorce. Quantity of contact was measured by parent's ratings and adjustment was measured by both parent and teacher ratings. Similarly, Jacobson (1978a) found that, for 3- to 13-year-olds, time lost with the custodial mother as a result of the divorce was positively correlated with sensitivity of the child, but was not correlated with

18 other social adjustment categories. She also found that for this same age group, there was no significant association between activity lost with mother and adjustment. As these results can be confusing, it is important to note that Jacobson distinguished between time lost and activity lost with the mother in this study. Jacobson (1978a) also found that for 7- to 13-year-olds, activity lost with the mother as a result of divorce was positively correlated with antisocial behavior and academic disability in the child. However, for this same age group, time lost with mother was not associated with the child's adjustment.

While it appears that amount of parent-child contact may have some effect on the child, it is difficult from these few results to determine an overall guiding principle. Generally, it appears that time and activity lost with the custodial mother has relatively little effect on children from preschool age through age 13. There is one exception, however. Activity lost with the mother appears to be related to antisocial behavior and academic disability for 7- to 13-year-olds. From these results it is difficult to say whether time and activity lost with the custodial mother actually has no effect on the younger child, or whether the effects are simply not observable until the child is older.

Parental Discipline

Another important aspect of the parent-child relationship concerns the disciplinary methods and how they affect the child. At least for intact families, research has long suggested that the type of discipline employed by the parent will affect the development of social competence in the child. Generally, authoritative parenting has been found to be more conducive to the development of social competence than authoritarian or laissez-faire parenting styles (Baumrind, 1971, cited in Santrock & Warshak, 1979). Authoritative parenting has been defined as involving "extensive verbal give-and-take between the child and parent, considerable warmth, and the use of control and enforcement of rules and regulations" (Santrock & Warshak, 1979, p. 115). In contrast, the authoritarian parent is likely to be more restrictive and punitive while the laissez-faire parent is likely to be more permissive.

Santrock and Warshak (1979) have also illustrated the benefits of authoritative parenting in both mother custody and father custody homes. They found that the parent's use of authoritative parenting was significantly associated with higher warmth, self-esteem, maturity, sociability, and social conformity in children. Also they found a significant negative correlation between this type of parenting style and anger and demandingness in children in both types of custodial homes.

Results from several studies have indicated the negative effects of the other two types of discipline styles on children of divorce. First, Santrock and Warshak (1979) found that custodial fathers' use of authoritarian parenting was associated with increased anger and a lack of independence in the children. Similarly, Santrock (1975) found that divorced women disciplined more with power assertion and that this type of discipline was associated with increased social deviancy. However, Santrock and Warshak (1979) also found that there were no significant correlations between the mother's use of an authoritarian style and the child's social competence.

Second, several studies have shown the negative effects of the laissez-faire parenting style on the child. More specifically, laissez-faire mothering has been associated with decreased warmth and social conformity, increased anger and demandingness (Santrock & Warshak, 1979). Also, the single parents' lack of control of their adolescents has been found to be associated with increased anxiety and fear in their adolescents (Fry & Trifiletti, 1983). However, in contrast, Hodges, et al. (1983) found that greater permissiveness on the part of custodial mothers was related to significantly less fearfulness, depression, and withdrawal at school in their children.

While these results generally appear to point to the benefits of authoritative parenting over authoritarian and

laissez-faire parenting, an alternative explanation must be considered for all of the above results. As in all correlational studies, it must not be assumed that there is a direct, causal relationship between type of parenting style utilized and positive social adjustment in the child. At least in some of the cases, it may be that the behaviors of the child directly influence the type of parenting style utilized by the parent. All that can be said for sure is that the type of parenting style is associated with a particular child attribute.

Parental Explanation of the Divorce

Generally the research in this area has suggested that parents who give more information to the child regarding the divorce have children who are better adjusted to the divorce. Significant differences were found in children who received "some," "little," or "no attention" from their parent in dealing with the separation and divorce. Those who received no attention evidenced more aggression, more cognitive/learning disability, more overall severity of symptoms, and more somatic behavior (Jacobson, 1978b). Also, a significant difference was found between children whose parents have versus whose parents have not encouraged discussion after the separation/divorce; the more encouragement, the better the adjustment (Jacobson, 1987b). Finally, Kurdek and Sieskey (1980) found that children were better adjusted when their parents explained that both

parents shared in the decision to separate rather than when they gave a neutral explanation with no mention of the parents' role in the decision or when they implied that one of the parents was responsible for the separation. Clearly, parental attention given to the child regarding the divorce appears to be associated with more positive adjustment in the child.

Parental Expectations of the Child

Another topic of consideration concerns the expectations that the custodial parent places on the child in the newly formed single-parent family. There are several parental expectations that appear frequently in the single-parent family literature, such as demands for the child's loyalty (exclusive of the child's loyalty to the non-custodial parent), demands for the child to act as a mediator or communicator or parent to parent messages, and demands (either direct or indirect) that the child become more independent. All of these expectations have been found to be associated with negative feelings in the adolescent (Fry & Trifiletti, 1983). Fry and Trifiletti found that the custodial parent's pushing of the adolescent toward an early independence was associated with feelings of fright and alarm. Also, the use of the adolescent as a mediator or communicator between parents was associated with strong feelings of fear, guilt, and resentment. Finally, fights and demands for the adolescent's loyalty were associated

with intense guilt and anger. Although more research needs to be done, it is clear from these results that when a custodial parent makes unwarranted demands on the adolescent that are more oriented toward the parent's needs than the adolescent's, the adolescent responds with negative emotions.

In summary, there are some general conclusions that may be made concerning the custodial parent-child relationship. First, it appears that the parent's and child's satisfaction with the relationship tends to be associated with adjustment in the child. However, given the subjective nature of this topic and the impossibility of determining a causal relationship between satisfaction and adjustment, it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions regarding the direct effect of satisfaction on the child's adjustment.

Second, it is also difficult to say from the available research whether the amount of post-divorce parent-child contact differentially effects the child. While it generally appears that time and activity lost with the custodial mother has relatively little effect on the child, some results also suggest that some children are negatively affected when they lose activity with their mothers post-divorce. Clearly, more research is needed in this area, especially given the fact that children do tend to lose time with their custodial parent after the divorce due to increased parental responsibility for the family.

Third, while a causal relationship cannot be determined, the literature appears to support the use of authoritative parenting within the single-parent family over the use of either authoritarian or laissez-faire parenting. Generally, parents who used an authoritative parenting style had children who were better adjusted. Also, the literature seems to indicate that open parental discussion of the divorce with the child and a description of the divorce as a joint parental decision, are both associated with child adjustment.

Finally, some research has shown that parental demands for the child to be exclusively loyal, more independent, and for the child to act as a parental mediator were all associated with negative emotions in adolescents. However, as these are all the result of one self-report study, it would be helpful if more research concentrated on these issues, specificaly utilizing more objective measures.

## Support Networks

In considering the custodial parent-child relationship, it is also important to take into account the family's use of external support systems, such as extended family or additional caretakers. The transition from a two-parent to a one-parent household can be extremely stressful, and thus it would seem to be likely that the use of external support networks would benefit both parent and child. Results of

the studies in this area generally indicate that the use of a support network is associated with positive outcomes in the child.

First, a few studies have indicated that the parent's lack of the use of support networks to help meet their own personal needs was related to their child's maladjustment. Woody et al. (1984) found that parents who used less help in coping with the divorce and who valued help less were associated with children with significantly more maladaptive symptoms. It is impossible to say which symptoms, if any, were associated with this factor in this study, as Woody et al. did not isolate and correlate specific symptoms. However, their checklist of child symptoms included such reactions as worry, stomach trouble, compulsive eating, shame, loss of friends, and aggression/fighting. Similarly, mothers with fewer support systems have been found to use more authoritarian punishment techniques, have more rules, and use more spanking than mothers with more support systems (Colletta, 1979). Santrock (1975) and Santrock and Warshak (1979) have shown that these types of parenting behaviors are associated with increased social deviancy, anger, and decreased independence.

Second, there appears to be a positive relationship between amount of time the child spends with additional adult caretakers (non-parents) and the child's adjustment.

Hodges et al. (1983) found that the number of days per week that the preschool child was cared for by a non-parent was negatively correlated with anxiety. They also found that the number of overnights per week that the preschool child was cared for by a non-parent was negatively correlated with acting out. Similarly, a positive correlation was found between time spent with additional adult caretakers and warmth, sociability, and social conformity in both father- and mother-custody children, aged 6 to 11 years (Santrock & Warshak, 1979). Thus it appears that involvement with extra-familial caretakers is associated with a number of positive outcomes in the child, at least from preschool age through age 11.

In summary, it appears that the custodial parent's use of external support systems, such as extended family or additional caretakers is associated with greater adjustment in the child. Further research would be useful to help identify specifically the most helpful aspects of support systems, the ages at which the child benefits most from additional caretaking, and the optimal amount of time for a child to spend with an additional caretaker.

## Conclusions

This paper has reviewed and synthesized the literature on the effects of custodial parent factors and parent-child relationship factors on children in single-parent families.

This particular aspect of the research concerning children and divorce is important, especially in light of Hess and Camara's (1979) finding that it is post-divorce family functioning, rather than family structure, that is most important in mediating the effects of divorce on children.

While more research is needed to investigate many of the variables further, current literature has much to communicate to single parents about the ways in which their relationships with their children can influence the effects of divorce. First, it is helpful to understand how parent and child demographics such as age and gender are related to adjustment. While it is clear that these are factors that a parent cannot change in an attempt to help his or her child adjust to divorce, it nevertheless is helpful for parents to understand the relationships that do exist between such factors, so that they can adjust their parenting accordingly.

Secondly, some of the most crucial variables in considering the parent-child relationship are the personal characteristics of the custodial parent. Parent characteristics such as stress level, amount of distress, emotional availability, values, and competence/assertiveness have been shown to influence the child's adjustment. Generally speaking, the research suggests that parental stress, distress, and lack of emotional availability are all correlated with maladjustment in the child. It also appears

that parents who highly value love and respect and who generally tend to be more competent and assertive also tend to have children who are well-adjusted. In contrast to the parent and child demographics, these are factors that a parent can attempt to change to some degree in an effort to help his or her child adjust to the divorce and the new family situation.

Thirdly, factors that relate specifically to the parent-child relationship, such as parent and/or child satisfaction, parent-child contact, parental discipline, parental explanation of the divorce, and parental expectations of the child have all been found to be related to children's adjustment. Generally, the research indicates that the parent's and child's satisfaction with the relationship, the use of authoritative parenting techniques, and open discussion of the divorce all tend to be associated with better adjustment in the child. However, while it may be that loss of contact with the parent and increased parental demands on the child may be associated with child maladjustment, more research needs to be conducted to further explore these results. These also are factors that a parent can attempt to modify in an effort to help the child adjust.

Finally, research has found that usage of external support networks by single-parent families is related to positive child characteristics. It is apparent from this

review that support networks are a valuable asset not only to the single parent, but also to the children.

Most importantly, the information presented in this review could help single parents in their effort to help their children adapt to the divorce. This research could also help members of the mental health and legal professions, as they frequently are consulted in situations involving marital separation, divorce and custody disputes. Finally, it is hoped that this review will serve as a springboard for further research that specifically addresses significant family process variables in the post-divorce family.

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